

Nineveh's Pretensions to Divine Power in Nahum 3:16

Cat Quine

University of Nottingham

cat.quine@nottingham.ac.uk

Abstract

With the exception of Nahum 3:16, in the Hebrew Bible Yahweh alone has the power to multiply humans so that they will be as innumerable as the stars. Nineveh's multiplication of her merchants "more than the stars of the heavens" (Nah 3:16) was, therefore, tantamount to a challenge to Yahweh's divine power. The destruction of Nineveh demonstrated that Yahweh answered this challenge.

Keywords

Nahum – Nineveh – Ishtar – stars

1 Introduction

On the whole, previous scholarship has tended to view Nah 3:16 as unremarkable, perhaps because the verse is rather hidden amongst a host of locusts. Nah 3:15-17 reads as follows:

[15] There the fire will devour you,
the sword will cut you off {it will devour you like the locust}.
Multiply yourselves like the locust,
multiply like the grasshopper!
[16] You have multiplied your merchants

more than the stars of the heavens {the locust sheds its skin and flies away}.¹

[17] Your guards are like grasshoppers,
your scribes are like swarms of locusts,
settling on the fences on a cold day,
when the sun rises they fly away,
no one knows where they have gone.

NAH 3:16-17

Discussions of Nah 3:16 have tended to revolve around the abrupt change of imagery between the locusts (vv. 15b, 16b, 17a) and the stars (v. 16a).² The differing terms for the locusts used in these verses have also attracted scholarly attention.³ Commentators that have attended to both the merchants and the stars usually note the importance of trade in the expansion of the Neo-Assyrian empire and sometimes observe that comparison with the stars signifies an innumerable number elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible.⁴ However, there is an

- 1 Some scholars follow *BHS* and take ילק פשט ויער (v. 16b) to be an early gloss, probably linked to the insertion in v. 15a, and perhaps inserted to better integrate v. 16a into vv. 15-17; so Lothar Perlitt, *Die Propheten Nahum, Habakuk, Zephania* (ATD 25/1; Göttingen, 2004), p. 38; Klaas Spronk, *Nahum* (HCOT; Kampen, 1997), p. 3. Pinker proposed reading v. 16 with כארבה transposed from v. 15b—לק פשט ויער השמים ילק מוכבי רכליך הרבית רכליך—which has the advantage of better integrating the stars imagery into the surrounding verses; Aron Pinker, "On the meaning of htkbd in Nahum III 15," *VT* 53 (2003), pp. 558-61.
- 2 See, for example, John H. Eaton, *Obadiah, Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah: Introduction and Commentary* (London, 1961), p. 76; Michael H. Floyd, *Minor Prophets Part 2* (FOTL 22; Cambridge, 2000), pp. 75-76; A. Cohen, *The Twelve Prophets: Hebrew Text and English Translations with Introductions and Commentary* (2nd Ed.; London, 1994), 207; Ralph L. Smith, *Micah-Malachi* (WBC 32; Waco, 1984), pp. 89-90; Angelika Berlejung, "Erinnerungen an Assyrien in Nahum 2,4-3,19," in *Die unwiderstehliche Wahrheit. Studien zur alttestamentlichen Prophetie: Festschrift für Arndt Meinhold* (ABGe 23; Leipzig, 2006), pp. 323-56; Karolien Vermeulen, "The Body of Nineveh: The Conceptual Image of the City in Nahum 2-3," *JHS* 17 (2017), pp. 1-17, all of whom comment on the locusts and mention the multiplication of Nineveh's officials, but do not discuss the stars.
- 3 E.g. Duane L. Christensen, *Nahum: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 24F; London, 2009), pp. 381-82; John A. Thompson, "Translation of the Words for Locusts," *BibTr* 25 (1974), pp. 405-11.
- 4 Elizabeth Achtemeier, *Nahum-Malachi* (Interpretation; Atlanta, 1986), p. 28; Marvin A. Sweeney, *The Twelve Prophets, Volume Two* (Berit Olam; Collegeville, 2000), p. 446; Klaus Seybold, *Nahum, Habakuk, Zephania* (ZB; Zürich, 1991), pp. 40-41; O. Palmer Robertson, *The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah* (NICOT; Grand Rapids, 1990), pp. 124-25; J.J.M. Roberts, *Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah* (OTL; Louisville, 1991), p. 75; Christensen, *Nahum*, p. 383; Spronk, *Nahum*, p. 138. Cathcart cited an example from an Old Babylonian text where

important nuance that has so far not been observed in scholarly treatments of the verse; although innumerable numbers of humans are compared to stars elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, in these other verses, it is always Yahweh who multiplies them, and those multiplied are always Israelite. To multiply people like the stars was an attestation of Yahweh's sovereign rule; for the biblical authors, Yahweh alone had the power and divine right to promise eternal existence to his chosen people. Nahum 3:16 thus stands out in the biblical corpus as being the only verse where someone other than Yahweh multiplies humans like the stars and where those that are multiplied are non-Israelite.

That Nineveh stands accused of appropriating one of Yahweh's divine prerogatives is emphasised by the use of different prepositions; Yahweh commonly promised to multiply his people *like* the stars of the heavens (ככוכבי השמים), but in Nah 3:16 Nineveh multiplied her merchants *more than* the stars of the heavens (מכוכבי השמים).⁵ The hubris implied in this statement is self-evident; if the stars signified an innumerable number, then only a being of extraordinary power or extraordinary hubris could claim to multiply humans *more than* the stars.

2 The Challenges and the Challenger(s)

Timmer drew attention to two stereotypes of Assyria in Nahum, namely, its unjust trade practices and the fact that it is presented as directly opposed to Yahweh.⁶ Timmer did not, however, make a connection between these observations and Nah 3:16, but there are strong reasons for doing so. The reference to merchants, rather than humans more generally, in Nah 3:16 is no accident; the merchants directly connect Nineveh's challenge to Yahweh's authority to its economic practices. This correlation between economic success and pretence

stars were used to signify a large number of "gossipy women"; Kevin J. Cathcart, *Nahum in Light of Northwest Semitic* (BO 26; Rome, 1973), p. 146. However, there is no mention of multiplying people like the stars in that text; the numerical comparison is a straightforward simile.

- 5 Other examples of Yahweh promising to multiply humans *like* the stars include the following: Gen 22:17 (והרבה ארבה את־זרעך ככוכבי השמים); Gen 26:4 (והרבותי את־זרעך ככוכבי השמים); Exod 32:13 (ארבה את־זרעכם ככוכבי השמים); Deut 1:10 (יהוה אלהיכם הרבה אתכם והנכם); Deut 10:22 (ויעתה שמך יהוה אלהיך ככוכבי השמים לרב); Deut 28:62 (ונשאתם במתי מעט תחת אשר הייתם ככוכבי השמים לרב כי־לא שמעת בקול יהוה אלהיך); 1 Chr 27:23b (ובניהם הרבית ככבי); Neh 9:23 (כי אמר יהוה להרבות את־ישראל ככוכבי השמים [sic]). In the biblical corpus Yahweh never multiplied humans *more than* the stars of the heavens.
- 6 Daniel C. Timmer, "Boundaries without Judah, Boundaries within Judah: Hybridity and Identity in Nahum," *HBT* 34 (2012), pp. 173-89, esp. 179.

to divinity is found elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. Sennacherib's boasts of bringing cedars from Lebanon is described as mocking Yahweh in Isa 37:21-25//2 Kgs 19:20-24 and Ezek 28:1-6 directly relates the king of Tyre's wealth and "wisdom in trade" (חכמתך ברכלתך) to his claims to be a god. In Isa 37//2 Kgs 19 and Ezek 28, as in Nah 3:16, there is an implicit trajectory; successful economic practices resulted in hubris, which led to (false) claims of divinity and a perceived challenge to Yahweh's authority.

In Isa 37//2 Kgs 19 and Ezek 28 the challenger is an individual king, however, in Nah 3 the challenger is a city, representative of an empire and the goddess Ishtar. The Book of Nahum persistently blurs these lines between Nineveh and Ishtar, city and goddess.⁷ This fluidity is readily understandable in light of the associations between deities and cities, and Ishtar's particular connections with Nineveh.⁸ Nineveh's expansion of its merchant class—insofar as it affected Judah—could have been perceived as a challenge to Yahweh's authority on earth, as it came at the expense of Yahweh's people. Additionally, however, Nineveh's economic success reflected the success and power of its gods. Consequently, in the interpretation of Nah 3:16, the two cannot be separated; Nineveh's expansions of economic practices on earth reflected the possibility that its gods were expanding their territories in the divine realm.⁹ The issue at stake in Nah 3:16, therefore, was not an ethical concern about Nineveh's expanding economic practices, but, rather, the perceived challenge to Yahweh's authority created by them.¹⁰

7 See, for example, Laurel Lanner, *"Who Will Lament Her?": The Feminine and the Fantastic in the Book of Nahum* (LHBOTS 434; London, 2006), pp. 80-164; Aron Pinker, "Descent of the Goddess Ishtar to the Netherworld and Nahum II 8," *VT* 55 (2005), pp. 89-100; Gregory D. Cook, "Human Trafficking in Nahum," *HBT* 37 (2015), pp. 142-57, esp. pp. 144-45; Timmer, "Boundaries," p. 181.

8 Nineveh's association with Ishtar is clearly demonstrated in the Neo-Assyrian royal inscriptions, with the common line "Nineveh, the exalted cult center, the city loved by the goddess Ištar ..." Sennacherib 15, 18-27; Sennacherib 1, 63-65; Sennacherib 16, 41-50, as enumerated in A.K. Grayson and J. Novotny, *The Royal Inscriptions of Sennacherib, King of Assyria (704-681 BC), Part 1* (RINAP 3/1; Winona Lake, 2012).

9 Lanner, *"Who Will Lament Her?"* p. 99.

10 O'Brien noted that if Nah 3:16 is understood in an accusatory sense, then Nineveh's control of international trade is presented as a crime (Julia M. O'Brien, *Nahum* [Readings; London, 2002], 71, 140). But this seems a strange accusation if so, as Judah benefited enormously from the expansion of international trade under the Neo-Assyrian Empire. It seems more likely that the accusatory sense of the verse comes from the connection between Nineveh's economic success and its hubristic aspirations. As Isa 37//2 Kgs 19, Ezek 28, and other texts such as Isa 14, testify, no being, whether mortal or divine, was permitted to challenge Yahweh.

It is also noteworthy that, unlike locusts, the stars had a certain permanence to them. Yahweh's promises of descendants like the stars was not just a promise of large numbers, but was a promise of enduring existence. The connection between Nineveh's merchants and the stars suggests that Nineveh's hopes for perpetual existence lay in its reliance on international trade and wealth. This reliance on trade, rather than on Yahweh, was not a sentiment the biblical authors sought to encourage; other texts exhorted Israel to rely on Yahweh rather than other nations, for its survival and development.¹¹ In this regard, Nah 3:16-17 provided a valuable lesson for Israel, as Nineveh's destruction demonstrated that even the most powerful of nations would fall if it relied on economic success, rather than on Yahweh. Ironically, rather than securing its permanent existence, Nineveh's economic success resulted in hubris which led to its downfall.

3 The Resolution of the Challenge

In ancient Near Eastern literature, the description of an enemy as a sinner against the gods called for the application of lethal force, which the Book of Nahum vividly illustrates.¹² By multiplying its merchants more than the stars, Nineveh usurped one of Yahweh's divine attributes. As such, lethal force was both justified and required to answer the challenge.

In terms of the natural world, the imagery of stars disappearing at sunrise (Nah 3:17) is a logical metaphor used to describe the disappearance of Nineveh's merchants. However, as with much of the imagery in the book, there may be additional levels of meaning inherent in the language. The prophet's choice of the image of stars disappearing before the sun is an interesting one as—in Neo-Assyrian royal iconography—Ishtar was usually portrayed surrounded by stars or represented by them, while the winged sun was the symbol of Aššur and represented Neo-Assyrian imperial rule.¹³ Interpreted symbolically, therefore, the sun and stars can be understood in two ways, either as symbols of

11 E.g. Deut 17:14-17; Hos 7:8-16; 8:8-10; Isa 31:1-3.

12 See comments on the depiction of enemies as sinners and the justification of lethal force in Ehud Ben Zvi, *A Historical-Critical Study of the Book of Obadiah* (BZAW 242; Berlin, 1996), p. 71.

13 E.g. Beate Pongratz-Leisten, "Divine Agency and Astralization of the Gods in Mesopotamia," in *Reconsidering the Concept of Revolutionary Monotheism* (ed. Beate Pongratz-Leisten; Winona Lake, 2001), pp. 137-85; Tallay Ornan, *The Triumph of the Symbol: Pictorial Representation of Deities in Mesopotamia and the Biblical Image Ban* (OBO 213; Göttingen, 2005), pp. 151-54; "kakkabu," CAD 8:47.

the two Neo-Assyrian deities, Aššur and Ishtar, or as symbols of that which these two deities represented, the imperial rule of the Neo-Assyrian kings and the city of Nineveh. Either way, the sentiment is ironic. Rather than the sun and stars evoking their usual connotations of the strength of the Neo-Assyrian Empire and its gods, in Nah 3:16-17 the sun and stars combine to symbolize its downfall. The imagery of locusts is similarly ironic. The Neo-Assyrian king and his army were sometimes compared to a locust swarm seeking to conquer the nations in the Neo-Assyrian inscriptions, which evokes connotations of the size, power, and speed of a locust swarm.¹⁴ However, the emphasis in Nah 3:16-17 is very different. Rather than representing a powerful army taking over the land, the locusts of vv. 16-17 would soon vanish from their own land. Cook has also observed a similar polemic in the use and reversal of the shepherd motif in Nah 3:18-19.¹⁵ In those verses, reference is made to the king of Assyria/Aššur (מֶלֶךְ אַשּׁוּר) in the context of shepherds falling asleep and their flock/people being scattered. Cook argued that the author used the shepherd motif which was commonly associated with Neo-Assyrian kings to depict, not only the failure of the Neo-Assyrian kings, but also the failure of the god Aššur.¹⁶ It thus seems that Nah 3:16-18 deliberately uses motifs or symbols associated with Neo-Assyrian kingship and power and ironically inverts them.¹⁷ Thus, the sleepy shepherds would lose their people and the sun would cause that which represented its own bureaucracy to disappear.¹⁸

4 Conclusion

In sum, the stars of Nah 3:16 deserve more attention than has previously been recognised. When compared to other biblical examples, it seems clear that the language of multiplying merchants more than the stars was used by the prophet to depict Nineveh's pretensions to divine power. The response is ironic; Nineveh's hubristic aspirations only demonstrated its weakness. In

14 Berlejung, "Erinnerungen an Assyrien," pp. 342-43.

15 Gregory Cook, "Nahum's Use of Ambiguity and Allusion to Prophesy the Destruction of Spiritual Powers," (PhD Diss. Westminster Theological Seminary, 2014), esp. pp. 254-64.

16 As the kings were appointed by, represented, and worshipped, Aššur, their failure symbolised his failure; Cook, "Nahum's Use of Ambiguity," pp. 254-64.

17 See especially Berlejung, "Erinnerungen an Assyrien," pp. 348-52; Achtemeier, *Nahum-Malachi*, p. 27; Floyd, *Minor Prophets*, p. 76; O'Brien, *Nahum*, p. 70; Smith, *Micah-Malachi*, p. 89.

18 This ironic presentation seems more persuasive than interpreting the rising sun as Yahweh himself, contra Sweeney, *The Twelve Prophets*, p. 446.

contrast to Yahweh's multiplication of humans like the stars that provided eternal descendants for Israel, Nineveh's merchants would vanish when the sun rose. The imagery of the rising sun as the catalyst for the disappearance of Nineveh's bureaucracy may be intended to evoke the winged sun as the symbol of Neo-Assyrian rule, which underscored the implication that Assyria was the architect of its own downfall. Yahweh's commands to Nineveh to multiply themselves like the locust and the grasshopper (3:15b) are thus laden with irony; Yahweh exhorted Nineveh to expand itself further, because that expansion would hasten its downfall. Nahum 3:16-17 provided two important lessons for the people of Israel. First, hubristic reliance on bureaucracy and international trade could bring about the downfall of even the most powerful of nations. Second, no matter their size or power, Yahweh could defeat any nation or deity who sought to challenge his divine authority.

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